

Prison band

When I lived in Los Angeles in the late 80's I was a member of a garage band that played a couple of times at the prison where the "Manson Girls" were incarcerated.

I had become reacquainted with my old friend Steve Amici, whom I knew from our fraternity back in the days of university life in Orlando. Steve was fascinated with the Charles Manson murders and that whole story, and had become penpals with the female members that were serving life sentences in a prison about an hour's drive away. With some encouragement from "the girls", he realized that if we could put together a band, we would be allowed in the prison to play for the inmates and meet these women in person. Steve was a really talented musician, so he put together a makeshift band that would play oldies rock 'n' roll. We weren't very good, but what we lacked in talent we made up for with enthusiasm.

I had recently started playing electric bass through a series of odd coincidences, that in hindsight, look like fate. I had no musical background at all, the extent being that my parents played a record once once a year during Christmas. When I was around 12 or so I became obsessed with playing the drums, and had a small band that played in my bedroom. I learned how to poorly mimic the drum solo from the Iron Butterfly song "In-a-gadda-da-vida", and that was about it. We were awful, but had a lot of fun.

Fast-forward 20 years and I started to come in contact with music again, noticing the low notes for the first time. And then came the gentle prods: an assignment photographing the bass player from Guns N' Roses for Fender, my next-door neighbor, heavy-metal rock god who gave me an acoustic bass and some instruction, and then the invitation to be in this little band and play at a women's prison. I came into the spell of the bass, and began hearing music in a way I never had before. To me, playing bass is a bridge between percussion and melody, with just enough of each. I like to say that I'm the person in the band that you don't notice until he stops playing. Never being truly comfortable out front, it's the perfect place for my personality.

Steve had us practice simple, three-chord rock 'n' roll songs and we eventually learned enough to be able to play live for about an hour. When he finally thought we were ready, Steve booked a date for us to play at the California Institution for Women in Chino. At the time, it was the only women's prison in California, with over 2000 inmates, and one of the largest women's prisons in the world. They had all types of criminals there, including murderers, which was why we were going.

As you can imagine, getting a group of people, with all their equipment, in and out of a high security prison, is quite a process. There were multiple layers of

screenings, fences, barbed wire, guards and so forth to go through. Once we were in, we were closely watched.

After getting all set up, sound-checked and ready to play, they let the women in, and good god, from their reaction you would've thought we were The Beatles! Let's just say they were very appreciative. I don't know if it was the music so much as it was just that they didn't get to see people from the outside very often, and certainly not a group of young-ish men.

It was such a hit, we were invited back a second time where we were given more leeway and shown how they lived. Our band played against them in softball and we got demolished. Both times Steve was able to speak briefly with his murderous penpals, with the "X"'s on their foreheads, inscribed by Charles Manson, well-hid behind bangs. One of the women has since died, and the other two, now in their 70s, are still in that same prison, having been denied parole multiple times.

Since it was our specialty, we also played at the Los Angeles County jail for men and the Federal Prison near Long Beach, once home to Al Capone. Playing for male prisoners was an entirely different experience. For one, the security seemed much higher, and there was definitely a feeling of danger in the air. They also weren't as excited to see us. As we rolled our equipment through the prison grounds to the auditorium, with armed guards at our sides, it was sad to see the old men tending the gardens, knowing that they would probably die there.

On one of our last gigs, we got out of the prison business and played at a mental health facility instead. The Camarillo State Mental Hospital was near Malibu and Steve thought it might be a fun and interesting place to play. He was correct. Once again, we felt like we were huge rock stars as our audience in the auditorium was clapping, yelling, and dancing madly during our songs. And then we realized they were clapping, yelling, and dancing madly in between the songs as well.



